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July 17th: Ezra 5 & Titus 3

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Tattenai's investigation concerning the authorization of the temple rebuilding project. Saved by God's grace for a new manner of life.

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Transcript

Ezra chapter 5. Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Josedach arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. At the same time, Tatanai the governor of the province beyond the river, and Sheethar Bozani and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus.

Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure? They also asked them this, What are the names of the men who are building this building? But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report

should reach Darius, and then an answer be returned by a letter concerning it. This is a copy of the letter that Tatanai the governor of the province beyond the river, and Sheethar Bozani and his associates, the governors who were in the province beyond the river, sent to Darius the king. They sent him a report in which was written as follows, To Darius the king, all peace.

Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands.

Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure? We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. And this was their reply to us, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.

However in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt, and the gold and silver vessels of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Shesh-baza whom he had made governor. And he said to him, Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site. Then this Shesh-baza came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.

Therefore if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure in this matter. Ezra chapter 5 continues an Aramaic section of the book which runs from chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18, largely containing correspondence with Persian kings. These are key witnesses to the Jews life during the Persian period.

They also serve as an apologetic for the rebuilding efforts more generally, especially for the later period of Nehemiah. At the beginning of this chapter we have references also to two important prophetic voices of the period, Haggai and Zechariah, who played pivotal roles in encouraging the rebuilding of the temple. While much of the preceding chapter addressed the period of the reign of Artaxerxes several decades later chronologically, at least according to the longer chronology that most scholars adopt, at the end of that chapter we will return to a period shortly after the events described in the very

beginning of chapter 4, during the reign of Darius I. The Jews had faced concerted opposition to their project of rebuilding the temple from surrounding peoples, and this had discouraged their efforts, preventing them from making progress during the rest of the reign of Cyrus, through the reign of his successor Cambyses and into the reign of Darius I. While they had started to lay the lower foundation, the actual rebuilding of the temple had been placed on hold.

In the book of Ezra, the explanation for the stalling of the rebuilding project chiefly focuses upon the opposition faced by the people. In the books of Haggai and Zechariah, there is more criticism of the people themselves for their failure to advance the work. They are accused of being too preoccupied with their own affairs to rebuild the house of God.

Zechariah is here referred to as the son of Iddo. In Zechariah 1.1 he is identified as the son of Barakaya, the son of Iddo. Later in Nehemiah 12.4 and 16 we see that Zechariah was the head of the priestly family of Iddo, his grandfather.

In the joining together of Zerubbabel, a governor descended from David, Jeshua the high priest and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, figures representing all of the traditional offices of Israel's public life, king, priest and prophet, we see the unity of the temple rebuilding effort. The prophet brings the word of the Lord and the vision that inspires the people. The king or the governor gives his strength to the project and the consecration of the new temple and its priesthood will be achieved through the high priest.

The reference here to the name of the God of Israel who was over them might refer to the Lord's rule over his people or perhaps even to the way that the people were set apart by the Lord's name placed upon them. The final verse of chapter 4 spoke of the second year of King Darius which is the context given for Haggai's prophecy in his first chapter where he gives his account of the recommencement of the rebuilding efforts. In Haggai chapter 1 verses 12-15, I am with you declares the Lord.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Sheal-Tiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehoshaddak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, in the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. The governor of the province of beyond the river or the trans-Euphrates province which included the land of Israel along with Syria and Lebanon was Tatanai.

He along with his associates questioned the temple rebuilders. They did not directly oppose the project in the way that the Jews Samaritans neighbours had, however they wanted to know their authorisation. While wanting to confirm that the returnees were authorised, they did not put a halt to the project, determining rather to wait to hear a response from Darius.

As in the prophetic guidance and the Lord's stirring up of various people's hearts, the hand of the Lord is seen in this. The rest of the chapter contains the letter written by Tatanai and his associates to Darius, describing what they had witnessed in their inspection and asking for direction in how to treat the temple rebuilders. They give a careful report of what's taking place and the speed with which things are progressing.

If the rebuilding of the temple is not to go ahead, it should be addressed with some urgency. They had enquired concerning the authorisation for the rebuilding and also concerning the names of those who were involved. Their primary identification of themselves is as the servants of the God of heaven and earth.

They make clear that they are not building a temple where none has been previously, rather they are rebuilding a great former temple that was destroyed. The cause of the temple's destruction was not the greater power of some foreign gods, but the anger of the Lord against his people who had proved unfaithful, giving them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Later however, as the kingdom of Babylon had passed into the hands of the Medes and Persians, Cyrus had returned the gold and silver vessels and authorised the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed.

The items had been delivered into the hands of a former governor, Shesh-Baza. The way that Shesh-Baza is referred to here suggests that he has not been a leader in the region for some years now. Tattani asked King Darius for a confirmation of the claims made by the temple rebuilders.

If Cyrus had in fact authorised the rebuilding, then there should be a reference to the decree to be found in the royal archives in Babylon. The relevant records will later be found in Echbactana. A question to consider.

In this chapter we see the involvement of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the priest, Jeshua, and a governor descended from King David, Zerubbabel, in the rebuilding of the temple. Where else in scripture do we see examples of how figures associated with these three different officers could be involved in the building and the upkeep of temples? Titus chapter 3 The saying is trustworthy. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him. Knowing that such a person is warped and sinful, he is self-condemned.

When I send Artemis or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Xenus the lawyer and Apollos on their way. See that they lack nothing.

And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith.

Grace be with you all. From the Apostle Paul's teaching concerning appropriate behaviour in the household, in chapter 2 of Titus. In chapter 3 he moves to the more general behaviour of the church and society.

This presumably is teaching that they had received before, so Titus' duty is to remind them of it, rather than that of laying a foundation. Once again, Paul's teaching here might indicate a particular concern for the public image of Christians in the society of Crete. In certain respects, Christians need to stand out, yet in other respects they need to fit in, to be people who are not troublemakers, rabble-rousers, discontents or revolutionaries, but upstanding members of the society.

They are to be submissive to rulers and authority, to obey those things laid upon them by the government, but also to be a public-spirited people. We might here recall the Prophet Jeremiah's instruction to the captives in Babylon, in Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 7. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Similar teaching is elsewhere in Paul's writings, for instance in Romans chapter 13 verses 1-7, and then elsewhere in the New Testament, in places like 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 13-17.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor's supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil, and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honour everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the Emperor. As a people, Christians need to avoid slander. Perhaps Paul has in mind the bad-mouthing of authorities that people can so often engage in.

Appropriate Christian submission to rulers and authorities requires, among other things, according them appropriate respect in the way that we speak about them. Christians are to be a peaceful people, avoiding quarrels among themselves, or getting entangled in those of the wider society. Here we might also think back to the way that Paul has previously described the opponents of Titus and Crete, contentious people who are marked out by their quarrelling.

Rather than such characteristics, which ultimately flow from pride, Christians should be distinguished by being conciliatory, by being considerate, forbearing, tractable, and then also humble and meek. Such humility and meekness will extinguish many conflicts before they even get started. These virtues need to be exhibited in all of the Christians'

interactions, both within the Church and with people outside of it.

The grounds for this sort of behaviour are found in the work of God, a work of God by which we were delivered from a former manner of life and transformed so that we might live differently thereafter. Verses 3-7 provide the basis for the statement of verses 1-2. It is a great before and after statement, beginning with a characterisation of our former manner of life and then speaking of the means by which we were delivered from it.

It rules out salvation by works of righteousness, before describing the means by which God saved us, and then the end for which he did so. Verses 4-7 are all a single sentence in the Greek. As Philip Towner notes, Paul's characterisation of Christians' former manner of life could be clustered under three headings.

Ignorance, which includes foolishness, disobedience, and being led astray, followed by bondage, being slaves to various passions and pleasures, and then finally hatred, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others, and hating one another. Once again, we might see something of the shadow of the opponents in Crete here. Deliverance from such a manner of life would require a number of different things.

It would necessitate revelation and knowledge to address the ignorance. It would require redemption and deliverance to address the bondage. And it would require a new principle of love to address the hatred.

That need for a new principle of love is perhaps where the accent of Paul's teaching is most strongly placed. The sort of society that arises when people practice that former way of life is one of deep antagonisms and tensions between people. People are always trying to get advantage over others, resenting others, being bitter towards them, or malicious and vindictive in their intentions.

Mutual hatred is the operating principle for life in this manner of society. One of the things that Paul diagnoses in the false teachers that he challenges is that behind their teaching, one needs to recognise these dynamics at work. They are not merely concerned about ideas and truths.

Scratch the surface and you will see that they are being driven by these dynamics of hatred. Salvation for Paul is an epiphany. In verse 4, But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, this is something that we have seen in the preceding chapter, in verses 11 and 12, for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

The language of verse 4, goodness and loving-kindness, is the sort of language that in Paul's day would have been particularly associated with a benevolent ruler. This benevolence of God the Saviour is something that leads to our salvation. Paul explicitly

excludes anything in us that might have merited God's action of salvation.

God's salvation is purely of his own mercy. Works, whether works of the Jewish law or more general ethical behaviour that might be practised by certain Gentiles, is ruled out as a basis for God's salvation. Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, his focus is generally particularly upon the Jewish law.

Here, and on a few other occasions, it becomes clear that Paul's point is more generally applicable. For instance, in 2 Timothy 1, verse 9, Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. And then in Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9, For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Some have seen in verses 4-7 a possible baptismal hymn. Raymond Collins, for instance, argues that if we remove some of the clauses concerning justification, which Paul has added to the hymn to unpack his point, we will see that it has a natural poetic form in the Greek. Salvation here occurs by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

This expression could be read in various ways. It could be read like, through the washing of regeneration and through the renewal of the Holy Spirit, or it could be read more with the sense, through the washing that brings about regeneration and renewal, given by the Holy Spirit. In the first case, there are two distinct operations.

In the second, there is a single washing by the Holy Spirit, which involves both renewal and regeneration. The washing of regeneration could refer to the act of washing, or it could refer to the place of washing, the lava, for instance. We encounter such language elsewhere in the New Testament, for instance in Ephesians 5, verses 25-27.

Or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Also in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 11. Within the wording of such verses, we might hear Old Testament prophetic statements concerning the New Covenant being echoed.

For instance, Ezekiel 36, verses 25-27. And you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Such a statement clearly brings together images of water, the spirit and renewal.

A similar conjunction of imagery can be found in Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus in John chapter 3, where we also have the element of rebirth present. You must be born again,

by water and the spirit. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we might think about places like 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17, for themes of renewal.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come. Or in Romans chapter 6, verse 4, we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

The redemptive historical underpinnings of all of this might be seen on the day of Pentecost, as Christ baptises his church by the Holy Spirit. How then should we understand the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit? Some, like Towner, have seen this as a metaphorical reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. However, with perhaps the majority of commentators, I believe that this needs to be related to baptism.

This of course is not to pit baptism against the Holy Spirit. Rather, baptism is a means by which we enter into full enjoyment of the life of the Holy Spirit. It is in baptism that God confirms and seals to us what he has already granted to us in quickening us to newness of life.

In this respect, baptism might be compared to a coronation. Although the king's accession to the throne might occur upon the death of the former monarch, the coronation is the public validation of his sovereignty, his entrance into the full enjoyment of his new office, and the open and public recognition of his new status. The person who has been converted to belief in Christ, but has never been baptised, is fundamentally stunted in his Christian growth.

He might be compared to the child that has been adopted into a new family, but does not get around to taking on his adoptive family's name, nor is he entering into full fellowship with his new siblings, or eating at the family meal table. In the New Testament, baptism is not so much a work that we do, but rather an act of God's grace and assurance to enroll and confirm us in the fellowship of his Son, marking out our very bodies by a sign of Christ's death and burial, so that we might be assured of sharing with him in resurrection life. Baptism brings us into a full participation in the life of the community formed at Pentecost.

As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 13, For in one spirit we were all baptised into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit. Seen this way, baptism, which Paul presumes as being received and lived out by faith, is the definitive event that can stand for the whole realities of regeneration and renewal that are brought about by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is in baptism that the faith of the convert enters fully into its rebirth-rite.

As such, baptism can be a powerful and effective symbol of the entire reality of God's

grace that has led us to that point. The gift of the Spirit is received through the work of Jesus Christ our Saviour. It is through Christ's ascension that the Spirit can be poured out at Pentecost.

Having received this wonderful new standing before God purely on the basis of his grace, God's purpose can be achieved. We are now heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This great work of God's goodness in salvation is the basis for our transformed manner of life.

For Paul, it is imperative that people live this out. This transformed manner of life is the purpose of it all. To the extent that a transformed manner of life is not being lived out, salvation is not being experienced.

In verses 9-11, Paul returns to the question of the false teachers in Crete, instructing Titus more directly on how to deal with them. He must beware of engaging with false teachers on their own terms. Dubious speculations, arcane knowledge and esoteric teachings are dangerous.

As the false teachers in Crete are handling them, they draw people's attention away from the clarity of the Gospel and the faith that corresponds to it. The false teaching Paul describes here is similar to that described in 1 Timothy 1 verses 3 and 4. Titus needs to be wise to the false teachers, recognising the deeper moral rot that often lies behind the facade of the false teaching. There are persons who by their very nature stir up divisions, because they are arrogant, sinful and warped, as he goes on to describe them.

Such persons need to be dealt with in a manner akin to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 verses 15-17. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother, but if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Paul's instruction to Titus here seems to follow the same pattern. Those who reject the earlier warnings need to be excommunicated. Paul concludes by giving instructions to Titus concerning future plans.

Paul will either send Artemus or Tychicus to him, and at that point Titus needs to come to join him in Nicopolis, a city on the west coast of Greece. Xenus and Apollos will also accompany one of these men, and they need to be helped on their way, provided with hospitality while in Crete and given the resources for the next leg of their journey. The practice of hospitality in the early church was one of the reasons why they had such an effective network of churches.

The frequent movement of ministers and missionaries around this network also greatly

strengthened the witness of the gospel. The church that it produced was far more tightly knit. Before he signs off, Paul gives Titus yet one more reminder that the Cretans and Christians more generally need to devote themselves to good works.

Here, however, he probably has the more immediate need of the travelling ministers in view. He closes the epistle, as he usually does, with final greetings. Such exchanges of greetings, not just between Paul and Titus, but between their respective communities, was another way in which stronger bonds within the early church could be forged.

A question to consider. The form of life that the church is to practice is founded upon God's own action, which reveals in turn his character. After experiencing the salvation of God, God's action and character becomes the basis of our own action.

How does God's action and character revealed in his salvation help to explain the mode of life that is practiced within the church?